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ED 1.310/2:279721

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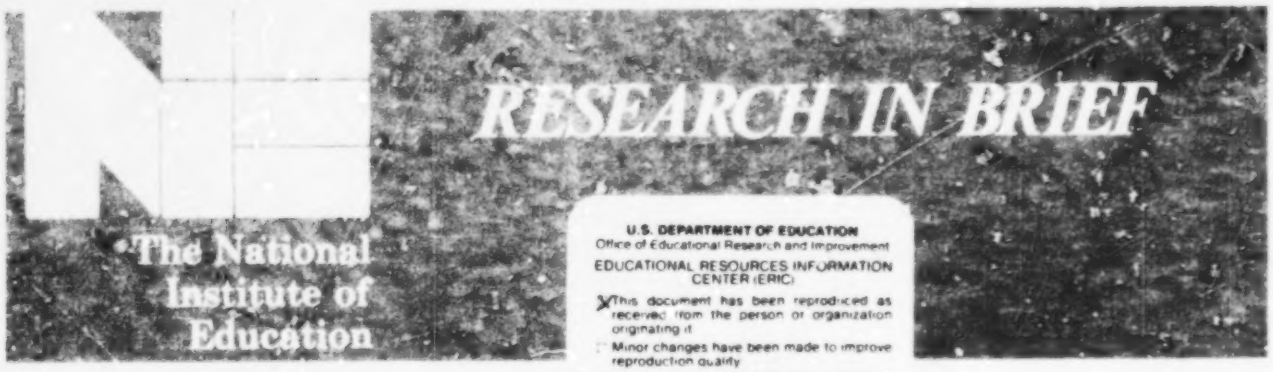
RESEARCH IN BRIEF
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Manuel J. Justiz, Director

January 1985

College Test Scores Declining

Much has been written recently about the declining test scores of America's high school students. But what about college students? How are they faring on standardized tests?

Not well, according to research sponsored by the National Institute of Education (NIE), the research arm of the U.S. Department of Education. In fact, test scores of college graduates generally have declined over the past two decades, especially in subjects requiring high verbal skills (i.e., French, history, etc.).

This is one of the major findings of an NIE-funded study, 'The Standardized Test Scores of College Graduates, 1964-1982.' The study is significant because for the first time it pulls together scores on a variety of examinations as well as background information on students who take the tests.

The study indicates that (with the exception of engineering majors) U.S. students who major in professional and occupational fields, such as business administration, education, social work, etc., have lower test scores than those who major in the arts and sciences. The proportion of test takers with undergraduate professional majors has increased approximately 30 percent in the past decade.

Students who major in areas characterized by formal thought processes, deductive reasoning, and structural relationships, such as mathematics, philosophy, engineering, economics, etc., score higher.

Among 15 subject area tests of the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), which college graduates take to apply for graduate school, the steepest declines occurred in the subjects of sociology, political science, English literature, history and French. In contrast, GRE scores rose in mathematics and physics.

Besides the GRE, the study examines trends in scores on the Law School Admissions Test, the Graduate Management Admissions Test, and the Medical College Admissions Test.

The study also indicates three distinct periods when test scores changed noticeably: between 1964 and 1970 they declined sharply; between 1970 and 1976 they rose; and between 1976 and 1982 they showed a modest decline. These changes are attributed in part to content changes in the tests and to different methods of administering and scoring the tests.

The study points out that we cannot explain changes in test scores merely by referring to the numbers of test takers, or their changing characteristics (age, gender, ethnic/racial group), or their citizenship status.

Despite the fact that so many students take the tests (more than 500,000 U.S. citizens yearly) and that such tests are important indicators of the quality of college student learning, information on test scores and students who take

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them has been inconsistently gathered and reported over the years.

Because the results affect a number of people (from graduate and professional school admissions committees, to students to policymakers), the study makes a number of suggestions on ways the testing services can improve the quality and consistency of the data they gather and report as well as on future research on the impact of college curriculum on student performance.

Rather than being defensive about test scores, the study suggests that educators should use the data to stimulate discussions about college curriculum and instruction and to focus on factors that make a real difference in student learning.

The study includes tables illustrating the different ways of determining change in these test scores over time, background characteristics of test takers, comparative analysis of performance by college major, and changes in the percentage of graduate departments requiring or recommending the examinations as part of the admissions process, among other topics.

The study, which was written by NIE Senior Associate Clifford Adelman, was prepared for the NIE-sponsored Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education. The full text of the report is available through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service, PO Box 190, Arlington, Va. 22210. Phone 703/841-1212. For further information about the report, contact Clifford Adelman, NIE, 1200 19th Street N.W., Mail Stop 1817, Washington D.C. 20208.

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DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 279 721 TM 870 167

TITLE	College Test Scores Declining. Research in Brief.
INSTITUTION	National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	Jan 85
NOTE	3p.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*College Entrance Examinations; Educational Testing; *Educational Trends; Graduate Students; Higher Education; *Scores; *Standardized Tests; *Test Interpretation; Undergraduate Students
IDENTIFIERS	Graduate Record Examinations; *Test Score Decline

ABSTRACT

This article is a brief summary of "The Standardized Test Scores of College Graduates, 1964-1982," a study sponsored by the National Institute of Education (NIE), which pulls together scores on a variety of examinations as well as student background information. Over the past two decades the test scores of college graduates have declined, especially in subjects requiring high verbal skills. With the exception of engineering majors, students who major in professional and occupational fields, such as business administration, education, social work, etc., have lower test scores than those who major in the arts and sciences. Trends in scores on the Graduate Record Examination, the Law School Admissions Test, the Graduate Management Admissions Test, and the Medical College Admission Test are examined. Information on test scores and students who take the tests has been gathered and reported inconsistently over the years. A number of suggestions are made on ways the testing services can improve the quality and consistency of the data they gather and report as well as on future research on the impact of college curriculum on student performance. (JAZ)

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